

October Newsletter Extended Article

Peer observation through the eyes of a teacher

By: Angie Gunter (teacher leader/Daviess Co. teacher)

When the peer observation lists were distributed to teachers in my district last year, I had to do a double-take. Did I read the list incorrectly? I've taught English for 13 years, and our district had several new English teachers who needed peer observers --I couldn't imagine why in the world I had not been assigned to any of them. I knew from my training I was not to provide evaluative comments, and I'm always interested in seeing what other English teachers are doing. I'll admit I was pretty disappointed.

To make matters worse, one of the teachers on my list was not even a high school teacher but an elementary teacher. I was certain she was a nice lady, but I've never taught in an elementary school --I spend my days with juniors and seniors. How was I going to effectively observe a classroom that was so different from my own? Obviously, someone had made a mistake. However, being the rule-follower that I am, I decided to deal with the mistake and go about my assigned duties.

My first experience was with a chemistry teacher. After our initial conversation about the purpose and procedure of the peer observation, I scheduled my classroom visit. The day I observed, students were conducting an experiment, attempting to put some of their theoretical knowledge to work using pennies, water, Alka-Seltzer tablets, and small tubes. Kids moved around the room, hypothesizing, trying various ways to complete the task. I loved watching them discover new principles and seeing the looks on their faces when they figured things out.

During the class, I watched how the teacher reacted to spilled water, dealt with a few loud squeals of excitement when the pennies shot to the top of the tubes, addressed disappointment when groups could not attain the desired results, and rephrased procedural steps to help students understand what to do. I scripted what I saw and heard.

Next, I observed one of the ROTC teachers. I had a difficult time imagining a course that would be more different than mine --his highly structured, disciplined student groups steeped in routine and order contrasted quite a bit with my very student-centered, flexible, choice-filled classroom. When I visited the class, I noted how the instructor overtly taught respect and how he affirmed students' attempts to connect knowledge of historical events to current world happenings. The most interesting portion of class, however, involved watching the students practice drills with their firearms. This never happens in my English class. I scripted what I saw and heard.

The next week, I traveled to the elementary school. In the second grade class, students began the lesson by correcting errors in sentences, and soon moved to a reading circle on the carpet. Although the lesson was engaging, I was drawn most to how familiar the students were with the routine. Transitions between lessons were seamless -- no waste of time. When students turned in their assignments, the paper collector knew it was her turn, and she knew in which bin to place the papers. When one student went to the neighboring classroom, she moved her magnetic name pin from the "in" list to the "out" list hanging beside the door. Again, I scripted what I saw and heard.

At the post-observation meetings with these teachers, I shared what I'd scripted and where I thought their comments and actions aligned within the domains of the TPGES framework. This led to what I think was the most rewarding portion of the experience. I had many questions for these instructors --questions I would not have had for high school English teachers. I wondered how often the chemistry teacher was able to physically demonstrate abstract concepts in ways students could actually witness. I wondered how the ROTC instructor motivated his members to enthusiastically volunteer in so many school and community projects. I wondered how the elementary teacher was able to multitask so effectively. Because of my questions, they shared their rationales, not for me to enter as formative evidence, but for me to better understand how they conducted classes and worked with their students in their content areas.

In answering my questions, their passion for their jobs and their students' success was evident. I think they enjoyed being able to share their choices with someone who was genuinely interested. I also found myself considering how I could incorporate their successful strategies in my own classroom. My curriculum is different, but every course of study should include challenging content, clarity of difficult concepts, structure, and smooth transitions. Perhaps the most rewarding benefit of the process, however, was that it forged relationships that might never have been built otherwise. We have more than 100 teachers in our building, so it is all too easy to just stay in our departments

I'm told the peer observation lists for this year will be sent out soon. I can't wait to see what "mistakes" my administrators make this time.



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